

Moses and Jeremiah to Jesus and Us

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Today is the day when Zion focuses on the *Book of Faith Initiative*, a churchwide program in the ELCA that hopes we will become more fluent in the first language of faith, which is a twenty-first century way of encouraging Bible study among Lutherans. It is an oddity, of sorts, that the two great traditions that preserved the Scriptures through the centuries have never found themselves categorized among the vast number of congregations that refer to themselves as *Bible-believing churches*. Roman Catholics had *the Magisterium*, which is the official and authoritative teaching office of the Church, and Lutherans had *Law and Gospel*, our interpretive key to understanding God, the Scriptures, and life itself. Lutherans *as Lutherans* have never gone to the Bible without faith's first conviction, namely, we are saved by grace through faith, and not by works, whether done by our hands or formulated in our minds. Salvation is God's gift, freely given, because of the great love with which God has loved us. That has been our focus the last two Sundays – God's love and God's grace, and the blessed assurance that comes with knowing that God has claimed us as His own through Christ our Lord.

This morning in Luther Hall between the services we will take up the call of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15) and the call God issued to Jeremiah while he was still in the womb (Jeremiah 1:4-19). Both prophets played key roles in the history of salvation. Moses gathered together twelve disparate tribes who had nothing but slavery in common; and through forty years of wandering in the wilderness, God turned these tribes who were no people into His people. Centuries passed, and when Jeremiah lived, it was no longer the Egyptians to the south who sought to enslave Israel. It was the Babylonians to the east, a people whose star had risen, who were looking to extend their empire from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. In Jeremiah's day, the ten tribes that made up Israel had fallen, and only the two small tribes of Judah were left, as yet unconquered. God assured His people that He would be with them, come what may. That was the setting, which set the stage for our First Lesson.

God didn't promise victory over the Babylonians. God didn't promise escape from the realities that surrounded them. But God did promise that even in exile they would be His people and He would be their God. He promised that even though the Temple was destroyed in the holy city of Jerusalem, He would write His Law, the Torah, upon their hearts. In other words, nothing will ever separate them from His love, His presence, His promise, and His power. (Jeremiah 31:33-34) They might not rule their neighbors, nor even themselves; but God's word would be written on their hearts. His peace would always be theirs. This sounds very reminiscent of Jesus' words in the Gospel of John: "Peace I give you, not as the world gives, give I to you." (John 14:27) The truth is that this shift of focus found in Jeremiah is precisely the shift in focus and mission that Jesus

brought to his ministry. He was not looking to start a dynasty in Jerusalem, but to send his disciples into the world, not as rulers but as servants, God's servants, spreading the Good News of God's reign to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Moses' moment came when he found himself talking to a burning bush, where God revealed His name, and with His name, His identity: *I AM WHO I AM*, an odd action verb that ties present tense with future promise in a God who is faithful to His Word and to His people. This name forms the background of the narrative that Matthew tells with his Gospel. We know the meaning of this name from the introduction we are given to our Savior at his birth. *His name shall be called Immanuel, which means God is with us.* (Matthew 1:23) We know the meaning of this name from the great commission our Lord issues to his followers at the Gospel's end: *I am with you* always, even to the end of the age, and beyond. (Matthew 28:20) The prophet Jeremiah didn't so much have a moment as a mood, the mood of a *Sad Sack*, who could bring down the room and everyone in it with a sense of despair that was infectious. Jeremiah was a downer, whose presence God's people avoided like the plague. But even the difficult truths he had to share maintained the silver lining of God's faithfulness. We can see this in the First Lesson.

“The days are surely coming says the Lord, *when I will make a new covenant* with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” That sounds like it could be bad. “It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – *a covenant that they broke.*” That sounds like bad news getting worse! But the news Jeremiah proclaims isn't all bad. In fact, it's not bad at all. This new covenant will be written not on tablets of stone but in their hearts, which can never be taken away from them. They won't need teachers to teach them about the Lord their God, *for they shall all know me*; and what they know is this, that *I the Lord will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.* (Jeremiah 31:31-34) This promise of a new covenant, written on their hearts, is none other than the gospel of God's grace, whose faithfulness is sure, and whose love and mercy are forever. This is the message that Jesus proclaimed, and lived, giving his life that we might find ours, sealing God's love with his death on the Cross, and unlocking its power with the promise of the Spirit.

As many clearly know, we are now entering into that season of the church year when the story of God's love and the meaning of Jesus' life transport us back to the sacred space we call *Holy Week*, with our most dramatic reading of the Passion Narrative this evening, with Palm Sunday a week from today, which will be followed by the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, with Stations of the Cross and our Tenebrae on Good Friday, leading to the tomb found empty on Easter Sunday. Lent is surely reaching its inevitable end, culminating with the divine necessity of Jesus' *Journey to the Cross*, leaving us with the promise of the Spirit and the mission of the church to fill the void left with the Empty Tomb. We are often too close to the Spirit's presence in the mission of the Church to sense the power of this miracle that God has wrought and given. But can you imagine – thinking for a moment like Jimmy Stewart in *It's A Wonderful Life* – what the world

would be like if Jesus hadn't lived, if he hadn't died, if he hadn't been raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, breathing new life into his band of disciples, who became a living, breathing, serving extension of His Body, proclaiming the Good News of God's grace and love and mercy to the four corners of the globe, to the uttermost ends of the earth? It is true that we often take this miracle for granted, but the fact of the matter is that we shouldn't. The life of the church, its mission, and the Spirit's power have formed lives and changed our world in more ways that we might imagine.

This past week, for those who have been staying current with our *Daily Devotional Guide* for Lent, invited us to enjoy stories of laughter and service with Renee Schrader and Dave Palumbo (for Monday, March 23, and Tuesday, March 24). We heard about the strength that comes through family and the miracles that are ours through faith with Vicki Givler and Juanita and Nick Cignetti. (Wednesday, March 25, Thursday, March 26, and Friday, March 27) In fact, if any of you know of the common denominator of lymphoma that connects Jessie Stayer and Chuck Cignetti, then you also know that Pat and Vicki and John and Becky are looking for the miracle of faith that came with Nick's vision and Juanita's rainbow! That was part of the reason I placed them side by side in our *Daily Devotional Guide*. This week came to an end with Carol Rossbach's reminder (on Saturday, March 28) about the vision of the ELCA "that the whole church become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened and empowered by the Word."

And that takes us to today, which we have set as the day that we move forward with the *Book of Faith Initiative*. During the Sunday School hour we will take a look at the miracle of the parting of the waters as Moses led God's people from slavery to freedom. We will also take a look at the subtly miraculous turn-around that has come to be known as the Jeremian shift. Moses turned exodus into peoplehood. Disparate tribes became God's people. Jeremiah transformed exile into mission. When the empires of the world sought to destroy God's people through deportation, Jeremiah prophesied that God would do great things through exile. That will lead us to Jesus, whose followers were inflamed with the fire of the Spirit and overcome with a missionary zeal, creating a movement that has changed our world and our lives. Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus, and us: this is the vision we are calling the *Book of Faith Initiative*, which we will introduce between the services in Luther Hall, to which you are all invited in our desire to grow in the knowledge of God's grace as we learn what it means to live into the life that's ours ... in Jesus' name. Amen

HOLY WEEK begins next Sunday with PALM SUNDAY

Palm Sunday: Two Services at 8:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. (Our Children's Easter Play)

Maundy Thursday: Two Services at Noon (Quiet Communion) and 7:00 p.m. (Seder)

Good Friday: Two Services at Noon (Stations of the Cross) and 7:30 p.m. (Tenebrae)

Easter Sunday: Two Services at 8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.; Eater Egg Hunt at 9:15 a.m.



Saturday, March 28: The Book of Faith Is Coming! Carol Rossbach

Scripture, Romans 10.17: “*So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.*”

One of the many things I like about being here at Zion is being able to study the Word of God with others on a regular basis. I heard on the radio the other day that the Jewish people are not to study the Torah alone. There should always be someone there to say, “but what about...?” I find that to be true with the Bible for me. I read and study it on my own, but reading and studying the Word with others brings me a deeper and broader understanding of the meaning in the text.

For example, we have a weekly Bible study that meets every Wednesday in the Resource Center, gathering at 10:00 a.m. to follow a study guide that is based on the Gospel reading from the previous Sunday. We call it *Daily Discipleship*. It never fails that through the questions posed in the lesson for the day, and the insights and experiences shared from others in the group, I always come away with new insights into the scripture and clearer application to my everyday life, even though I have heard or read it many times before. The fellowship of the small group study is also an added bonus, and everyone is welcome. All are invited.

When I was at the Synod Assembly last spring, I became aware that the ELCA is encouraging all members to improve our Bible literacy. The churchwide vision of the ELCA is “that the whole church will become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened and empowered by the Word.” There is even a *Lutheran Study Bible* that will be available soon, which will assist in this goal and mission. I find that the more I study and discuss the Scriptures with others, the more I understand, and that the more I understand, the more comfortable I become in talking about my faith.

Prayer: Heavenly Father – Help us to grow in wisdom as we study your Word with others, reflecting on how it applies to our daily life, and sharing our experiences. Let us continue to be aware that the Bible is our guide for daily living, not just for Sunday. We thank you for the fellowship that adds so much to our studies and our lives; in Jesus’ Name. Amen

**The Adult Sunday School Class Invites You To
Join Us For An Engaging Introduction To
The ELCA’s BOOK OF FAITH INITIATIVE
With New Lutheran Study Bibles!**

